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FM AMEMBASSY COLOMBO
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 5982
INFO RUCPDOC/USDOC WASHDC
RUEHNE/AMEMBASSY NEW DELHI 0930
RUEHKA/AMEMBASSY DHAKA 0079
RUEHIL/AMEMBASSY ISLAMABAD 7060
RUEHKT/AMEMBASSY KATHMANDU 5147
RUEHBK/AMEMBASSY BANGKOK 3178
RUEHGP/AMEMBASSY SINGAPORE 5689
RUEHLO/AMEMBASSY LONDON 3721
RUEHNY/AMEMBASSY OSLO 3793
RUEHKO/AMEMBASSY TOKYO 2874
RUEHKP/AMCONSUL KARACHI 2189
RUEHCG/AMCONSUL CHENNAI 7646
RUEHBI/AMCONSUL MUMBAI 5328
RUEHHK/AMCONSUL HONG KONG 0379
RUEATRS/DEPT OF TREASURY WASHDC
RUEHLMC/MILLENNIUM CHALLENGE CORPORATION
RHEFDIA/DIA WASHINGTON DC
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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 COLOMBO 000660

SIPDIS

SENSITIVE

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STATE FOR SCA/INS AND EEB/TRA/OTP
MCC FOR F REID, D NASSIRY AND E BURKE
BANGKOK AND SINGAPORE FOR TSA AND FAA

E.O 12958: N/A

TAGS: [EAIR](#) [ECON](#) [EINV](#) [ETRD](#) [PTER](#) [CE](#)

SUBJECT: SRI LANKA: COLOMBO AIRPORT TO SUSPEND NIGHT OPERATIONS IN
RESPONSE TO LTTE AIR ATTACKS

REF: A) COLOMBO 636 B) COLOMBO 630
C) COLOMBO 475 D) COLOMBO 637

¶1. (SBU) SUMMARY: Sri Lanka's Bandaranaike International Airport (BIA) will suspend nighttime operations following a series of air attacks by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), including two in Colombo. Defense Secretary Gotabaya Rajapaksa made the decision, seeking to reduce the possibility that travelers or airplanes would be harmed in any future LTTE air attacks. International airlines servicing Colombo pressed for the closure as a safety precaution. As BIA is Sri Lanka's only international airport, this move will have a negative impact on the tourism industry. The effort to reduce the risk that travelers will be hurt or seriously inconvenienced by LTTE attacks is a prudent, if painful, measure. End summary.

MAIN AIRPORT TO CLOSE AT NIGHT FOR THREE MONTHS

¶2. (U) On May 3, Sri Lanka's Bandaranaike International Airport (BIA) announced it would suspend night operations, effective May 10. The airport will close between 2230 and 0430 hours each night for the next three months. Any further extension, according to the Civil Aviation Authority, would depend on the security situation. This decision follows a series of air attacks by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). On March 26, the LTTE conducted an aerial attack on the Sri Lanka Air Force's Katunayake Base, with which the BIA shares a runway. On April 26, anti-aircraft guns were fired from Katunayake Base in response to a possible attack (which did not materialize) that caused the airport to close briefly, and on April 29, the LTTE targeted oil storage facilities outside Colombo (refs A, B, and C).

DEFENSE SECRETARY MAKES THE CALL

¶3. (SBU) Sri Lanka Civil Aviation Authority (CAA) sources told Emboffs that Defense Secretary Gothabaya Rajapaksa made the decision, with the concurrence of President Rajapaksa, to close the airport at night. The government believed the step was necessary to avert danger to air travelers caused by LTTE air attacks or military defensive fire. According to the CAA, the decision was also intended to minimize public inconvenience due to disruption of flights. (Note: The three times the airport was forced to close down in March and April, it diverted many incoming flights to India, while flights on the ground were heavily delayed.) The CAA gave international airlines a week to reschedule their Sri Lanka flights to comply with the closure.

AUTHORITIES THINK AIRPORT IS SAFE; AIRLINES DISAGREE

¶4. (SBU) Following the April 29 LTTE air attack, airline representatives and airport authorities convened the next day to discuss airport security. An airline station manager told Econoff that the Cathay Pacific country director spearheaded the night closure proposal, which the other airlines unanimously supported. The airport authorities, however, were reluctant to disrupt operations, arguing that the airport remained safe. Apparently, the Defense Minister shared the airlines' view. Cathay Pacific Airways has again indefinitely ceased flights to Sri Lanka. Emirates Airlines briefly suspended all flights after the April 29 attack, but now plans to resume daytime flights. Other airlines have not yet announced their plans.

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NEGATIVE IMPACT ON TOURISM INDUSTRY

¶5. (SBU) The managing director of a leading Sri Lankan tourism company told Econoff that airport authorities notified the Sri Lanka Tourist Board that they were considering cessation of night operations. The board opposed the move, but was not directly involved in the discussions between the airlines and airport. The director feared the move would have a major, negative impact on the already-declining tourist industry (ref D).

COMMENT: AIRPORT CLOSURE PAINFUL BUT PRUDENT

¶6. (SBU) The government has made a painful but prudent decision. It cannot like having such a decision forced on it by the LTTE, but the downsides were even worse. An LTTE bomb could have hit an airliner on the ground; an LTTE plane could have collided with a passenger plane in flight; or worst of all, government anti-aircraft fire could have hit a civilian plane in the air. Any of these could have produced great loss of life and property. The airport decision means the government's losses are mainly in air travel-related revenue and pride.

MOORE